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IN EDUCATION**

**INSPECTION OF  
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LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITY**

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## INTRODUCTION

1. This inspection was carried out by OFSTED in conjunction with the Audit Commission under Section 38 of the Education Act 1997. The inspection used the *Framework for the Inspection of Local Education Authorities* which focuses on the effectiveness of local education authority (LEA) work to support school improvement. The inspection also took account of the Local Government Act 1999, insofar as it relates to work undertaken by the LEA on Best Value.
2. The inspection was based on data, some of which was provided by the LEA, on school inspection information and audit reports, on documentation, and on discussions with LEA members, staff in the education department and in other council departments, representatives of the LEA's partners, and representative groups of headteachers. In addition, a questionnaire seeking views on aspects of the LEA's work was circulated to all 50 schools. The response rate was 84 per cent.
3. The inspection also involved studies of the effectiveness of particular aspects of the LEA's work through visits to 13 primary and four secondary schools, the pupil referral unit (PRU) and the special school. The visits tested the views of headteachers and other staff on the key aspects of the LEA's strategy. The visits and discussions considered whether the support which is provided by the LEA contributes, where appropriate, to the discharge of the LEA's statutory duties, is effective in contributing to improvements in the school, and provides value for money.
4. Evidence was also drawn from recent visits to Darlington schools and analysis of LEA documentation by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools (HMI), undertaking national monitoring work.

## COMMENTARY

5. Darlington became a new unitary authority in April 1997. It is the sixth smallest Local Education Authority in England. Around 70 per cent of the borough is rural, and the economic base of the town of Darlington itself has moved from engineering and railways to relatively low paid service industries. Levels of employment are comparatively high by regional standards. Levels of deprivation are higher than the national average, although there is wide variation across the authority.

6. The LEA did not have an easy start. It was under-funded, and for its first four years, has continued to operate on a low funding base. It began life with below average levels of overall achievement; high exclusion rates and a high proportion of pupils leaving school with no qualifications; many school buildings in poor condition and an over-generous school transport policy. It has effectively met its initial task of raising expectations and promoting improvement.

7. Satisfactory progress has been made in implementing its strategic plans for school improvement, including the Education Development Plan (EDP). Achievement in secondary schools has risen faster than nationally and is now broadly in line with national averages; more pupils are leaving school with qualifications. Improvement in primary schools has generally matched that nationally, although problems with target-setting and staffing its literacy strategy, has left the LEA with difficulties in achieving its target for improving standards of literacy.

8. Most of what the LEA does it now does satisfactorily and its strengths outweigh its weaknesses. Given its circumstances this generally represents effective, and in some respects, good progress. The LEA has successfully exploited its size to develop close, and positive, contact with its schools. The prevailing culture is one where schools feel involved in the decision making process. For the most part schools understand and subscribe to the LEA's priorities for improvement and support its efforts to achieve its targets.

9. The following functions are performed particularly well:

- support for numeracy in primary schools;
- asset management planning;
- provision of school places; and
- provision of performance data to schools.

Functions that are performed effectively include:

- support to improve attendance and behaviour in schools;
- support for literacy in primary schools;
- support for school management and governance;
- development and implementation of a strategy for special educational needs;
- support for early years education;
- support for ethnic minority children, including Travellers;
- support for information and communication technology; and
- support from financial, personnel and property services.

The following, however, are areas where the LEA is not effective:

- defining with schools the LEA's role in monitoring, challenge, support and intervention;
- support for target-setting;
- support for schools causing concern or likely to do so;
- provision and support for pupils without a school place, children in public care and child protection; and
- admissions procedures.

10. The demands of national agendas have been as great on this small, new LEA as they have been on larger and more established ones. It has met the targets for strategic plans and initiatives placed upon it. It has moreover, recognised and progressively tackled weaker services and has improved the overall level of service delivery to schools. Nevertheless, despite recent improvements in liaison and multi-agency working, and in the management of services, there continue to be weaknesses in some aspects of its support for its most vulnerable pupils.

11. The LEA is attempting to establish the new relationship that the Government seeks to promote between local authorities and schools. It has set out to identify the extent to which it expects schools to take responsibility for their own improvement, and its strategy for providing challenge and support to its schools as they move towards greater autonomy. However, its intentions have not always been clear enough to schools, nor adequately reflected in its actions, particularly in challenging its schools.

12. The LEA has already shown it has the capacity to improve and is capable of responding to the recommendations of this inspection. The council's commitment to education and school improvement, reflected in its targeting of scant resources; a strong corporate centre, with a good framework for elected members, officers, and services to deliver the authority's priorities; and effective leadership and management by senior officers, all form a firm base for development. It now needs to take action to consolidate recent improvements in multi-agency working and to address weaknesses in strategic liaison across departments in order to improve its efforts to combat social exclusion.



## SECTION 1: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

### Context

13. Darlington was established as a unitary authority in April 1997. It is the sixth smallest LEA in England. Around 70 per cent of the borough is rural. With the demise of the heavy engineering and railway industries associated with the town of Darlington itself, the traditional industries have been largely replaced by service industries characterised by low pay, but comparatively high levels of employment by regional standards. Levels of unemployment are below the Tees Valley average but above the national average. Levels of socio-economic deprivation are higher than the national average, but there are variations across the borough as a whole. Darlington does not quite reach the threshold of deprivation required to attract the full range of additional Government funding, or to access nationally funded educational initiatives that benefit neighbouring authorities in the Tees Valley.

14. The overall proportion of pupils in primary and secondary schools entitled to free school meals (FSM) is broadly in line with the average nationally and in the LEA's statistical neighbours.<sup>1</sup> The proportion of pupils from minority ethnic groups (2.4 per cent) is well below the national average (12.1 per cent) and in the similar LEAs. The percentage of pupils with statements of special educational needs (SEN) and the proportion of these pupils educated in special schools are slightly above the national average for primary aged pupils; they are broadly in line with the national average and similar LEAs for secondary aged pupils. Primary rolls are currently at their peak and are expected to decline by about 150 pupils per year over the next five years. Secondary rolls will continue a steady increase until 2004 and then decline.

15. In January 2001, Darlington had 13,805 pupils of compulsory school age educated in 35 primary schools, seven secondary schools, one special school and in the former pupil referral unit (PRU). There are 2,461 children below compulsory school age on the roll of maintained primary schools, including nine nursery units and six nursery schools. Four schools currently have Specialist School Status: two Technology, (including the special school), one Language and one Arts College. Two schools, one secondary and one primary, have been granted Beacon status. Only one secondary school is 11-18; other post-16 education is provided by a college of further education and a sixth form college within the borough. Darlington has no former grant maintained schools.

### 16. Key features of schools and overall pupil performance are:

- The LEA's data indicate that, overall, pupils' attainment on entry to primary education is broadly in line with national expectations for mathematics but slightly below in reading and language skills.
- Overall, attainment in Key Stages 1-3 is broadly in line with national averages, although this masks some slight but important differences.

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<sup>1</sup> Barnsley, Bury, Calderdale, Medway, North Lincolnshire, North Tyneside, Rotherham, Stockton on Tees, Torbay and City of York

- Attainment in reading and writing tests at Key Stage 1 is above the national average and that for statistical neighbours, but below average for mathematics. The rate of improvement has been broadly in line with that nationally for reading and writing but well below the national trend for mathematics.
- Attainment at Key Stage 2 is in line with the national average and similar LEAs in English and science and above average in mathematics. The rate of improvement in mathematics has been broadly in line with that nationally and for similar LEAs but, in the last two years has been just below the national trend in English and science.
- Attainment at Key Stage 3 is broadly in line with the national average and that for similar LEAs. The rate of improvement in mathematics has been above that nationally and in similar LEAs and has been well above the national trend in English and science.
- The proportion of pupils gaining five or more grade A\*-C at GCSE (45.4 per cent) is broadly in line with the national average and in similar LEAs. The LEA has successfully tackled an inherited problem of a high number of pupils leaving school with no qualifications and the proportions of pupils gaining one or more A\*-G grades is now above the national average. The rate of improvement in five or more A\*-C grades has been greater than nationally and that for pupils gaining one or more A\*-G grades has been well above the national trend.
- The overall progress of pupils between the key stages of education between 1995-1999 has been broadly in line with that nationally, though it has been slightly below average between KS2 and KS3. Results in 2000 have redressed this balance.

17. OFSTED inspection data indicates that the quality of Darlington's primary schools matches that of its statistical neighbours and is above that nationally. The proportion of primary schools graded good is above that nationally and in similar LEAs. The proportion of secondary schools graded good or very good at the time of their last inspection (43 per cent) was below that nationally (66 per cent) and in similar LEAs. Overall levels of attendance in both primary (93.9 per cent) and secondary schools (90.3 per cent) are broadly in line with the national averages. Unauthorised absence is well below national levels in primary schools, but well above national levels in secondary schools (1.6 per cent). Similarly, permanent exclusions are well below average in primary schools but, at 4.5 per cent, are well above the national level in secondary schools (2.8 per cent).

18. No schools are currently in special measures and two schools have been declared by OFSTED to have serious weaknesses. The LEA has identified a further three schools that are causing it significant concern.

## **Funding**

19. Darlington's education Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) per school-age pupil for 2000/2001 was 3.6 per cent below the national average. Since its inception

in 1997 the council has had one of the lowest council tax rates in England and has consistently spent a little below SSA on education.

	1997/98	1998/99	1999/2000	2000/01
Budget (£m)	33.8	37.4	39.3	41.7
SSA (£m)	34.1	37.6	39.7	42.1
Budget as percentage of SSA	99.1%	99.5%	99.1%	99.0%

20. Planned expenditure per pupil in 2000/01 is low, particularly so in primary schools: £1,988 per primary pupil compared with an average for statistical neighbours of £2,332; and £2,928 per secondary pupil compared with an average of £2,974 for statistical neighbours. Only ten LEAs nationally plan to spend less. However, all of the increase in education SSA for 2000/01 was passed to schools in line with Government's expectations. The council recognises the constraints of low spending on both schools and central services and will increase council tax rates in 2001/02 to allow education expenditure to rise to the level of SSA.

21. Planned expenditure of £37 per pupil on central administration is lower than statistical neighbours (£51), and the national average (£47). It is already well within the Government's limit of £55 per pupil for LEAs outside London in 2001-02. Darlington's expenditure per pupil on under-fives, out-borough special school placements, and home-school transport is high in comparison with statistical neighbours.

22. The funding formula is quite complex although the calculation of each school's allocation is clearly presented. The majority of schools are satisfied with the rationale behind the formula, and with the consultations on further delegation. Headteachers were appropriately involved in helping to refine the formula inherited from Durham LEA in 1997, and again in 1999 when a more wide-ranging needs-led review was undertaken. Although the outcome of the latter review was not implemented for financial reasons, the exercise improved understanding of the formula and the implementation of changes under Fair Funding.

23. The council has communicated its budget strategy well; the low spending per pupil was not mentioned as a significant issue in the school survey or during school visits.

24. The LEA has been successful in securing capital receipts and grants from a variety of sources to support a substantial capital programme. The legacy of under-investment in school buildings inherited by the council is being actively addressed. Initially reluctant to fund improvements through the Private Funding Initiative (PFI), the council has now applied for PFI credits to enhance special education provision within the borough. The LEA has recently won a substantial grant from the European Social Fund to develop provision for disaffected students and promote social inclusion. Education features significantly in community regeneration projects funded from the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB).

25. The council proposes to create an external funding officer post at corporate level. This is an appropriate response to the need to capitalise on the expertise

which already exists within different departments. The LEA has already helped many schools access grants from various sources; the proposed specialist post should help further by providing more comprehensive information and enhancing the bid-writing capacity of schools.

### **Council structure**

26. Darlington Council has 52 members: 35 Labour, 15 Conservative and 2 Liberal-Democrats. In 2000 the council adopted a cabinet structure in line with Government legislation to modernise local government. The executive cabinet of nine members is responsible for policy making but, as required by legislation, until April 2001, Cabinet decisions are agreed by a ratification committee before being implemented. Political responsibility for education rests with the executive cabinet member for education. There are five scrutiny committees, including one for lifelong learning. This committee is chaired by a member of the opposition. The communities have clear remits enabling them to monitor, review and evaluate cabinet decisions, and will perform a key role in the council's performance management system by monitoring the implementation of corporate plans and delivery of the council's Best Value performance targets.

27. The council has tried to ensure that new arrangements do not unnecessarily curtail the involvement of elected members and other groups in the decision making process. The education and lifelong learning scrutiny committee is broadly based politically and professionally and includes representatives of parents, schools and the Dioceses. However, the capacity of members and committees to monitor the delivery of broad corporate themes and targets that cut across individual services and council departments, for example lifelong learning, are not sufficiently developed. The council intends to provide training to help committees to develop their role, but detailed plans have not yet been developed.

### **The Education Development Plan**

28. The Education Development Plan is sound overall. The strengths of the plan outweigh a small number of less satisfactory features. A revised 2000 version of the 1999 plan took account of developments, but the priorities set out in the revision are unchanged. They are:

- to raise standards in literacy;
- to raise standards in numeracy;
- to raise achievement in Key Stage 3;
- to increase the percentage of pupils leaving school with accredited qualifications;
- to support the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs in mainstream settings; and
- to develop a consistent approach to early years education.

29. The EDP appropriately reflects national and local priorities. It is based on a survey of educational provision in the LEA soon after its formation in 1997 which drew attention, for example, to weaknesses in Key Stage 3 attainment before this became an issue of national importance. Each priority is clearly stated and is supported by a set of coherent and distinct activities. Consultation during the preparation of the original plan was good. Many schools have used it in constructing

their own improvement plans. There are clear links between school priorities, the priorities of the EDP, and the aims set out in the education service plan.

30. There are some weaknesses both in the original audit and in the plan. Little use was made of Section 10 inspection reports to identify the most common strengths and weaknesses in schools. The arrangements set out for identifying and supporting schools causing concern do not include a clear statement of criteria for the levels of concern. There is no analysis of the achievements of minority ethnic pupils in the plan. Determining whether progress towards achieving some of the priorities is on target is made difficult because several of the criteria for judging success are not sufficiently well specified. The revised plan makes several references to progress made since the original one, but these are not based on formal evaluation. However, progress has been subsequently analysed in more detail.

31. Targets set in the EDP for primary schools at the end of Key Stage 2 are challenging. That for English, has caused difficulties for the LEA and schools in attempting to devise realistic strategies to achieve it. Many schools have agreed to increase their own English targets to meet that of the LEA. However, several schools visited have little confidence that they will achieve the increase even with the additional resources the LEA is providing. In contrast, the target for mathematics has been increased to reflect improvements already achieved.

32. GCSE results in secondary schools show a significant improvement over the last three years and the LEA is on course to attain its 2002 targets. There is however still some way to go to reach the targets for unauthorised absence and permanent exclusions.

33. Overall, satisfactory progress has been made in implementing all six EDP priorities. Good progress has been made in raising standards of numeracy. A promising start has been made towards raising achievement in Key Stage 3, particularly in improving continuity between primary and secondary schools through the 'Mind the Gap' initiative. The proportion of pupils leaving secondary schools with no qualifications has reduced steadily since 1998 and the LEA's target was exceeded in 2000.

### **The allocation of resources to priorities and Best Value**

34. The allocation of resources to priorities is satisfactory, with a number of strengths. The council has prioritised education in the face of budgetary constraints. Spending on under-fives is already well above SSA, appropriately reflecting the council's aim of ensuring that children receive the best start to their education. It is now committed to funding education at SSA from 2001/02 and the introduction of its associated medium-term financial plan will provide welcome stability for education planning and help the strategic role of governing bodies.

35. Directors have appropriate discretion to redirect any savings within their own service area and are expected to manage overspends within their total allocation. Savings in out-borough special school fees, for example, are successfully being used to develop local provision in line with the council's policy of social inclusion. Savings from the proposed review of home-school transport will also be retained

within the education service to support school improvement. The senior finance managers at the corporate and education department levels are both recent appointments. They have already introduced greater rigour and clarity to budget setting and monitoring, which are now good. Only two schools had deficits at the end of 1999/2000, both of them less than 2.5 per cent. Over half of primary schools had surpluses in excess of five per cent, usually as the result of planned savings for future building work or investment in ICT equipment.

36. Darlington met the Government's target for the increase in delegated funds per pupil in 2000/01. The level of delegation (82.6 per cent) is somewhat lower than statistical neighbours (83.8 per cent) and nationally (84.2 per cent). Further delegation, including support for statemented pupils and the cost of primary school meals, is planned for 2001/02 when the level of delegation will be well above the minimum requirement of 85 per cent.

37. Structures for the implementation of Best Value are satisfactory. They are being strengthened in the light of experience from the first year of reviews. Following a qualified audit of the Best Value Performance Plan, future reviews will have more member involvement at the design stage and in monitoring their progress. The review programme will be made more manageable for a small council by extending it over the full five years instead of four, and with the scope of reviews broadened to reduce the total number and to strengthen cross-cutting themes.

38. At the time of the inspection, work on two Best Value reviews within the education service had just been completed. Since neither had received full council approval they were not subject to formal inspection by the OFSTED team. Both reports - one on early years provision, the other on the youth service - follow a rather rigid common format which the council is now changing. Both had taken nearly a year to complete and had to be adapted to take account of new Government initiatives after they started. In the case of the early years review, the recommended action takes forward the council's current strategy, with too little evidence of the level of challenge which reviews should provide. The LEA has successfully heightened headteachers' awareness of Best Value principles as a result of presentations and information from officers. The managers of council services for schools are also aware of governors' responsibilities and have, for example, improved the level of detail in their service specifications. Nevertheless, the changes have yet to have a significant impact on practice in most schools visited during the inspection.

## **Recommendations**

### **In order to improve political scrutiny and performance management arrangements:**

- monitoring and evaluation procedures should be developed (in consultation with members of scrutiny committees), to enable committees to effectively monitor the delivery of corporate themes and targets, and the work of associated departments and services.

## **SECTION 2: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT**

### **Implications of other functions**

39. The LEA provides satisfactory support for school improvement. Expenditure on the school improvement programme is close to the average for similar LEAs, and overall represents satisfactory value for money. Support was effective in three-quarters the schools visited. However, in four primary schools, the LEA's monitoring intervention had adversely affected the schools' ability to take sufficient responsibility for their own improvement in partnership with the LEA.

40. Overall, the advisory service provides sound support to schools. Good financial advice and support, prompt provision of budget information, and highly effective asset management also enable senior managers to focus their efforts on improving the work of the school. Personnel support has been inadequate, but is now satisfactory. Support for pupils with special needs in mainstream schools is generally sound. Co-operation between education and other key services is also generally sound. Nevertheless, despite improving multi-agency support for SEN, attendance, and behaviour, the LEA's support for some of its most disaffected and vulnerable pupils, particularly those excluded or educated otherwise than at school, is still unsatisfactory. Aspects of strategic liaison with social services are weak and adversely affect the LEA's support for children in public care and child protection arrangements.

### **Monitoring, challenge, support, intervention**

41. The principles of the LEA's strategy for monitoring, challenging, supporting and intervening in schools are sound. Aspects of monitoring and support have strengths. However, its implementation of key elements of the strategy is currently unsatisfactory. In reality, many schools do not fully understand how the strategy works. Its implementation has not been consistently effective, and in key cases, has potentially undermined the LEA's stated commitment to self-managing schools.

42. The changing role of the LEA has been discussed extensively in headteachers' meetings. Most schools visited had a sound understanding of the principle that support should be differentiated according to the school's need. Support is closely focused on EDP priorities, and monitoring is generally effective in identifying those schools likely to be in need of intervention and additional support. Each school has a link adviser who monitors the school through visits combined with scrutiny and analysis of performance data. Suitably evaluative reports of visits are sent to the headteacher, although not directly to the chair of governors. Most of the schools surveyed thought the LEA had a sound knowledge of their school. However, visits to schools showed that the interpretation of challenge was generally confined to questioning targets and only rarely had the school been stimulated to re-examine aspects of its current practice or strategic development. The perception of challenge, therefore, is narrow.

43. Each school is reviewed twice yearly and allocated to one of three categories - light touch (green), watchful eye (amber) or causing concern (red). However, few schools visited were clear about how the monitoring and categorisation operates, or

the support attached to each category. The criteria used to determine which category a school is assigned to are unclear, and headteachers are not sufficiently involved in decisions about their own school. The degree of intervention and support for schools in the amber and red categories is deliberately unspecified to enable it to be tailored to need. Many schools have not, therefore, fully understood the implications of intervention by the LEA.

44. Given its size, the LEA has wisely decided to limit its own professional development courses to matters that are specific to the LEA or that cannot be adequately obtained elsewhere. It has developed close consortium arrangements with the other Tees Valley LEAs. Darlington teachers also benefit from access to the professional development programmes of the North Yorkshire and Durham LEAs, as well as courses offered by local universities. Professional development is, therefore, well supported, although lengthy journeys and corresponding costs often serve as something of an obstacle.

45. Leadership of advisory and support services is sound, and the performance review system common to all departments is effectively used. The small size of the advisory service makes it difficult to cover more than a handful of subjects in depth, particularly at secondary level. It also makes it more difficult to adequately monitor and challenge secondary schools across the full range of their work, and the LEA is not using data effectively enough to systematically challenge or support specific subjects or areas of under-performance in its secondary schools. In order to widen the range of specialist support available to schools, the LEA rightly maintains a list of associate advisers. Schools visited were aware of this extended support, but few had independently made use of the service. The present practice of attaching link advisers to clusters of secondary and primary schools has some advantages but does not make best use of the specific expertise of each adviser.

### **Collection and analysis of data**

46. The provision of data of pupils' performance and supporting analysis to schools is a strength. Schools surveyed rated this service more highly than in any of the other LEAs surveyed so far. However, use of that data to set realistic but challenging targets with schools has a number of weaknesses. For example, there has not been consistent annual analysis of the attainment of ethnic minority pupils throughout the LEA, although there are plans to re-introduce this in the near future.

47. Good progress has been made in establishing a pupil-level performance database, supporting some value added analysis of pupils' progress. Comprehensive data on baseline assessments, SATs results and GCSE performance is provided each autumn, enabling schools to compare their performance with others in the LEA, and through close co-operation with the Tees Valley joint strategy unit, with similar schools in the region. In addition, a service level agreement (SLA), purchased by all but two schools, provides further help with the interpretation of the data and analysis of features specific to the school. A good range of training in data interpretation and analysis is provided at both LEA and school level.

48. The EDP outline of the process for setting performance targets by schools lacks detail. Link advisers are not usually involved in discussions about targets until these have been determined by the school and approved by governors. As a consequence, any challenge to raise targets is potentially confrontational. Many schools visited perceived this as a statistical process with no analysis of the prior attainment of the pupils, enabling the LEA to meet its targets rather than an assessment of what can realistically be achieved. There is too little focus on strategies the school might adopt to achieve the targets.

### **Support for literacy**

49. The LEA support for literacy has improved and is now satisfactory. The LEA faced unfortunate staffing problems during training for the implementation of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS). However, there is now a sufficient infrastructure in place to provide appropriate support for teachers. The quality and quantity of support have improved since the appointment of a new consultant and secondment of primary headteacher.

50. This improvement is timely. The stuttering start has hindered progress towards the LEA's over ambitious 2002 Key Stage 2 target of 85 per cent of pupils achieving the expected standards in national tests. Although standards at the end of Key Stage 2 are currently in line with the national average, the rate of progress has been marginally below that achieved nationally and is the lowest in the region. On current trends the LEA would not achieve the 11 per cent improvement needed to reach its 2002 target. The literacy team is aware of individual schools' performance. Schools whose standards fall significantly below the LEA average are identified for intensive support. Twelve schools have so far completed the additional support programme, with almost all showing improvement in standards.

51. Schools surveyed and those visited were satisfied with the level of support and training currently provided. The EDP contains appropriate activities for raising standards, although the absence of milestones for some activities make it more difficult to measure progress. Training courses are appropriately varied and cover a range of work that is helping teachers to develop their understanding of the NLS and more broadly, literacy across the curriculum. Suitable links have been established with special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs), and other teachers working in the early years and secondary schools. Several literacy initiatives, including family literacy have been successfully introduced into schools. Good links have also been established with the numeracy team, with joint work on key aspects of teaching and learning for both strategies.

52. The LEA has provided appropriate support for literacy summer schools, linking this effectively with its priority to raise standards at Key Stage 3. Additional work aimed at improving the continuity of provision between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3, via the 'Mind the Gap' project, is also helping to focus on raising standards. Attainment at the end of Key Stage 3 has improved and is now in line with the national average and in similar LEAs.

## **Support for numeracy**

53. The quality of support for numeracy in primary schools is good. Schools rate very highly the leadership and support provided by the adviser who manages the numeracy strategy, and the numeracy consultant. This is an effective team with a sound working strategy, clear targets and success criteria.

54. Mathematics results at Key Stage 2 have improved over the last five years, rising at a rate broadly in line with the national trend. Standards are higher than the national average and the average for similar LEAs. As a consequence, the LEA's target for 2001 has been increased from 75 per cent to 78 per cent, and that for 2002 from 78 per cent to 80 per cent. There is every indication that these ambitious targets will be reached. While Key Stage 1 results have also improved over the same period, the rate of improvement is lower and the overall standard at the end of the key stage is below the national and similar LEA averages.

55. Support is differentiated effectively between primary schools, with 18 so far identified for intensive support because their achievement levels in mathematics fell below the LEA average. Most of these have improved at a faster rate than the LEA average. Effective use is being made of the register of leading teachers to help spread good practice. Link advisers have contributed to monitoring of the implementation of the numeracy strategy by lesson observations in all schools. The analysis of these evaluations is reflected in a revised action plan prepared in August 2000. The plan emphasises the need to increase the use of ICT in mathematics, though school visits suggested there has been limited progress so far.

56. Activities to improve numeracy and raise achievement in Key Stage 3 have so far focused on the 'Mind the Gap' project, concentrating on continuity of learning between primary and secondary schools. A full time numeracy consultant for Key Stage 3 has been appointed from Easter 2001.

## **Support for information and communication technology**

57. Support for ICT in schools is satisfactory. The LEA's strategy has helped all schools to improve their provision for ICT. Limited advisory support has been focused on primary schools. This is reflected in the school survey; more than half of primary schools considered support to be good, or very good, whereas all secondary schools judged it as poor.

58. Starting from a low baseline both of provision and standards of achievement, the LEA is now contributing significantly to developments in primary schools. Until recently, inspection evidence indicated low attainment and limited opportunity for ICT in the curriculum in primary and secondary schools. The ICT development plan sets out a well-considered strategy to bring together curriculum and administrative information systems in schools, including the creation of an intranet, the implementation of an open integrated learning system in schools, and the improvement of hardware provision to enable schools to implement the national priorities of the National Grid for Learning (NGfL).

59. Satisfactory progress has been made in most respects, but the implementation of an integrated learning system and, to a lesser extent the development of the intranet, are behind schedule. Computer:pupil ratios in both primary and secondary schools have improved dramatically, to just below the national average in primary and slightly better than the national average in secondary schools. All schools now have at least one computer connected to the Internet. Most primary schools have a networked suite of PCs with connectivity, and NGfL funding should enable all to have this by 2002. Schools have prepared their own ICT development plans, most using a guidance model provided by the LEA.

60. The curriculum support team, with an advisory teacher and two support teachers, provides adequate support for primary schools but insufficient specialist support for secondary schools. A general adviser, who was formerly ICT adviser, continues to provide general oversight of policy. Support for primary schools is well differentiated, with about one third receiving intensive support. A good range of training provision is available, mainly for primary teachers. Darlington LEA is a provider of New Opportunities Fund (NOF) training, and most primary schools, together with a small number from neighbouring authorities, have registered with the LEA. This in part has enabled the LEA to employ additional staff to support ICT developments in schools.

61. Support for ICT in school administration is satisfactory, but with some weaknesses. The SLA for technical support, some of which is appropriately provided through a sub-contract with Durham County Council, is very detailed, including, for example, performance indicators and targets for response times and customer satisfaction. Schools have e-mail access to officers in the education department, and there is on-line transfer of financial information. The Darlington Learning Town intranet has considerable potential to support school administration, although developments are behind the original schedule and use is currently limited. There is some electronic transfer of pupil performance data, but work on a central pupil database is only just beginning.

### **Support for schools causing concern**

62. The intentions underpinning the LEA's strategy for intervention and support to schools causing concern are sound, and aspects of that support have positive features. However, these are outweighed by the failure to ensure that the reasons for intensive monitoring of progress or intervention are fully understood, contributing to the majority of these schools making less progress than they should have done.

63. Since the formation of the LEA, no schools have been deemed by OFSTED to require special measures, but two primary schools have been identified by Section 10 inspections as having serious weaknesses. Three further schools, one secondary and two primary, have been identified by the LEA as causing significant concern and placed in its 'red' category. The EDP sets out sufficiently detailed procedures for supporting schools in special measures and those with serious weaknesses. These procedures give a central role to the link adviser, and require action plans to resolve the weaknesses within a year, or, in the case of schools in special measures, a maximum of two years.

64. The EDP does not set out clear criteria for triggering the levels of the LEA's own concerns. The EDP states that the categorisation of schools is based on three general areas - pupils' achievements, leadership and management of the school, and the quality of education provided - but there is no specification of the indicators that are used to judge the school's quality in each area. This prevents schools from knowing in advance their likely categorisation, and denies them the means of determining how much improvement is needed for them to move up the scale. A lack of awareness of what, precisely, were the targets for improvement was undermining the effect of support in two of the three schools causing the LEA concern. It also contradicts the emphasis the LEA is placing on developing school self-review.

65. The schools with serious weaknesses have benefited from intensive support from both the literacy and the numeracy strategies. As well as the support provided by the link adviser, one school has benefited from the LEA's secondment of an experienced headteacher from another school, and the other from support from external consultants who helped to prepare the action plan and advised on its implementation. In addition, however, each school has had a sequence of three monitoring inspections conducted by a team of advisers. These were not well handled: the reasons for extensive lesson observations or their effect on subsequent action have not been adequately explained to staff. As a result, this intervention has not made a sufficient contribution to the improvement of the schools. A recent OFSTED monitoring visit to one school determined that insufficient progress had been made for the school's serious weakness status to be lifted.

### **Support for governors**

66. The support for governors is satisfactory with a number of strengths; schools surveyed were generally satisfied with all aspects of support. All schools currently subscribe to the SLA for training, and all but two for clerking services. The general quality of information provided by the LEA is satisfactory. The percentage of vacancies on school governing bodies, at nine per cent, is below that found in similar LEAs and nationally. The management of the governors' support service is effective.

67. The information service and training programme keep governors up-to-date with developments in education, especially in local and national initiatives, and enable them to carry out their statutory responsibilities. Training rightly includes the strategic role of governors and there is appropriate induction training for new governors. In addition to centrally run courses, there are opportunities for governing bodies to receive bespoke training. There are termly meetings between LEA officers, headteachers and chairs of governing bodies, and with a nominated link governor from each school. All these contacts are helpful in maintaining good relationships between the LEA and its schools.

### **Support for school management**

68. The LEA's support for school management is sound; although more work remains to be done to help schools to develop effective self-evaluation and in promoting school autonomy.

69. Newly appointed headteachers are well supported. Their schools are automatically placed for a short time in the 'watchful eye' category, which enables the LEA to provide additional support. Arrangements are made for a more experienced head of a similar school to act as mentor. Sensibly, given the size of the advisory service, the LEA provides little training itself in management for heads and deputies, but there is a good range of courses available to them through the Tees Valley consortium programme as well as from other LEAs and nearby universities. Heads and other members of senior and middle management are supported if they wish to enrol for training based on national standards, though there was little indication of the LEA initiating applications. Secondary schools surveyed were positive about the LEA's support for senior management, half judging it as good or very good; primary schools were almost as positive, though a third rated support as poor.

70. Support for middle management is very uneven, and for secondary schools it is poor. This is reflected in responses to the school survey, where a third of all schools rated it as poor. The professional development programmes offered by the regional consortium and neighbouring LEAs include courses for teachers in all subjects and aspects. LEA advisers organise regular network meetings for primary subject co-ordinators in English, mathematics, ICT and RE, but there are no such arrangements for the remainder of the curriculum. A small number of curriculum development groups, bringing together subject heads of department and middle managers in secondary schools, meet regularly. However they are dependent on the enthusiasm of individual teachers and are not systematically supported by the LEA. Proposals are currently under discussion to improve this arrangement using the LEA's Beacon secondary school, but as yet no action has been taken.

71. Support to improve the quality of teaching in primary schools is sound. It is provided chiefly through the national literacy and numeracy strategies, involving both consultants and link advisers observing teaching. In some schools, advisers have also worked effectively with senior managers to develop a framework for the evaluation of teaching. Newly qualified teachers are well supported through a series of meetings organised by the advisory service, and there is a useful guidance booklet. Mentors are appointed for them in schools, and training and support is also provided for the mentors.

72. The LEA's development of school self-review has been slow. This is a weakness because of its intended importance in determining the categorisation of schools. The LEA has not yet developed its own guidance on school self-review and visits to schools revealed a patchy picture, with some schools undertaking review activities on a regular and systematic basis and others having made little progress. However, The LEA is now actively promoting developments and is encouraging senior managers to undertake relevant training.

### **Support for early years education**

73. The LEA's support for early years education is satisfactory, with a number of strengths. OFSTED reports show that pupils under-five in the early years in all schools make good or satisfactory progress and, between their first and second inspections, all voluntary and private settings continue to fully meet OFSTED's

expected overall standards. The LEA undertakes detailed analysis of OFSTED inspection data to inform the programmes in the EDP and the early years development and childcare plan (EYDCP).

74. Strategic planning of early years provision is good and is well linked to the delivery of corporate priorities and plans for lifelong learning. Activities in the EDP, EYDCP, and in the proposed Sure Start programme are well integrated. The EDP and EYDCP aim to promote high standards of achievement in early years settings, through, for example, improving the early years curriculum and self-review. The early years development and childcare partnership is developing a quality charter and working with the education department to ensure the involvement of qualified early years teachers in all settings.

75. Schools visited had received good support and training from the early years service. There has been good progress in developing the Story Sacks initiative and schools reported improvements in standards of literacy and language development. Early intervention to support SEN children is improving. There has been some slippage, however, in improving parental involvement. Original EDP targets for developments in family literacy and numeracy have been met, though the number of schools and parents involved remains relatively small. The LEA did not monitor the progress of its broader family learning programmes sufficiently rigorously. However, it now has secure proposals and funding for a more comprehensive family learning strategy in association with the EYDC partnership.

76. The LEA and EYDC partnership have fulfilled their duty to provide sufficient places for all four year-olds, predominantly in the maintained sector, and have the capacity to meet targets for similar provision for three year-olds. The LEA is currently reviewing its pattern of maintained nursery provision; its review of the role of its nursery schools is, therefore, justified and well integrated into the overall partnership strategy.

## **Recommendations**

### **In order to improve monitoring, support, challenge and intervention:**

- clear criteria for the categorisation of schools should be published so that schools can apply them in their own self review;
- further steps should be taken to clarify the LEA's responsibility to challenge schools;
- link advisers should discuss targets with schools before these are approved by governing bodies; consider implications of the targets for the working patterns of the school; and ensure that challenge to targets reflects analysis of the prior attainment of pupils;
- governing bodies should receive copies of reports of monitoring visits; and
- ways of improving challenge and curriculum support for secondary schools should be developed, possibly through co-operation with another LEA or outside agency and by developing the roles of the Beacon and specialist schools.

**In order to improve support for schools causing concern:**

- the LEA should clarify how it will monitor progress, making explicit how proposed actions are intended to support the school's development; how that support relates to the implementation of the action plan; clear targets and criteria for progress; and an exit strategy for the school, with a timetable for reducing LEA intervention.

## **SECTION 3: STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT**

### **Corporate planning**

77. The strategic management of education in Darlington is sound. Elected members have a clear sense of the importance of education and its place within corporate priorities, and this is effectively communicated to schools by officers and members. Members are now sufficiently well informed to monitor the performance of schools and the progress of education developments in the LEA. Decisions on education are taken in a timely way and communicated to all relevant parties, including schools.

78. Corporate planning by the council is good. The community plan, and most recently the council's Best Value Performance Plan (BVPP), provide a straightforward and understandable framework for delivering the council's core priorities of social, economic and physical regeneration. They give a high priority to improving access to education and to lifelong learning, and to raising attainment in order to underpin economic regeneration. Both plans make clear the responsibility of council departments, including the education department, in implementing the corporate strategy. Progress in implementing corporate and related departmental planning is effectively monitored by the corporate management team led by the chief executive, and increasingly by members. Lines of communication, responsibility, accountability and related performance management are straightforward, pragmatic, and clear. Departments are required to ensure that individual service plans systematically address the delivery of relevant corporate themes and related performance targets in the BVPP.

79. As reported in section 1, the council has clear procedures for scrutinising policy decisions, and members are also involved in monitoring the delivery of corporate themes and performance targets by departments and services. However, the portfolios of cabinet members and remits of committees do not provide a clear framework identifying how the delivery of themes and cross-cutting inter-departmental work is to be monitored and evaluated.

80. The speed and transparency of financial decision-making are satisfactory, and have a number of strengths. The LEA has a clear perception of educational needs and, within the financial constraints that have operated since its inception, has budgeted effectively to support its priorities. Schools acknowledge the council's commitment to spend at SSA and to passport increases in education SSA fully to schools. They feel sufficiently well consulted on budget decisions through the director of education's regular meetings with headteachers and chairs of governors.

81. The director of education and his senior officers are well respected, provide effective leadership, and have set the tone of LEA/school relations. There is a clear commitment to school improvement. Consultation procedures are a strength. The LEA has taken full advantage of its small size and its ability to meet regularly with its schools. Headteachers generally commented very positively on their sense of involvement and partnership in planning and developments in education. Schools are clear about the LEA's consultation arrangements, for example through education management groups (EMG), the regular programmes of briefings for schools by

officers, and programme of collective and individual meetings with the director of education.

82. As a result, schools understand, and for the most part subscribe to, the LEA's priorities and its strategies to achieve its targets. The LEA has set out to clearly articulate the respective roles of the LEA and schools, the degree of responsibility it expects schools to take for their own improvement, and the role of the LEA in developing and maintaining that relationship. However, in a several of the schools that the LEA has identified as requiring support to improve, its actions have not always exemplified its intentions.

83. The LEA's strategic management and central administrative costs are low. It maintains a small central core of staff in the education department; reflecting the 'lean' model requested by schools at the time the authority was established. The organisation and management of the work of the department effectively reflects the corporate model; focusing on cross-service delivery of the key themes of raising achievement, lifelong learning, social inclusion and education and, most recently, on the quality and client focus of services. This model potentially provides a very effective structure for monitoring the work of the department.

84. Nevertheless, not all key education plans and individual service plans provide sufficiently clear and precise criteria or measurable outcomes to enable managers to monitor progress and success. The quality of planning within the department has improved but many plans still do not consistently provide sufficiently SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-related) targets or systematically evaluate progress against the actions identified in strategic plans. This makes it more difficult to monitor and measure implementation and effectiveness. The best service plans very effectively link individuals' performance and tasks to service targets and delivery of key strategic objectives but this is not equally developed across all services.

85. The LEA has developed effective links with its partners, including the Dioceses. Services within education are clear about their responsibilities for cross-cutting initiatives and are increasingly successful in collaborating with other departments and external agencies in order to support its priorities for education, particularly with regard to social inclusion and lifelong learning. Liaison with the Health Authority and police is good and has been particularly productive in social inclusion programmes that support disaffected young people in some of the most disadvantaged areas of the borough. The LEA knows it needs to improve the effectiveness of co-operation between education and social services in a number of strategic and operational respects. However, progress has been too slow and some required developments, although now in hand, have not taken place, for example in relation to child protection.

86. Sensible and pragmatic decisions have been taken to co-ordinate and manage the expanding partnerships and multi-agency groups that support national and local initiatives. The Darlington partnership, for example, established in 1997 as an independent body with representation from the public and voluntary sectors, is taking the leading role in co-ordinating the contributions of all sectors of education and business. The LEA contributes effectively to learning partnerships regionally and is

fulfilling its role in liaising with the regional Learning Skills Council (LSC) and with the developing Connexions network. Nevertheless, changes in regional partnership arrangements since the LEA was formed, particularly affecting post-16 provision, have led to a delay in some expected developments in the council's lifelong learning strategy.

### **Management services**

87. The 2001/02 arrangements for buying back management services are well-co-ordinated and provide a satisfactory infrastructure for schools. Services provide good value for money overall. Buy-back rates, already high, increased further in 2000/01, reflecting general satisfaction with the quality and convenience of most services, and schools' wish to support the LEA as it continues to develop. Improving the quality and client focus of services is now a specific aim within the education service plan.

88. Headteachers were fully consulted over further delegations under Fair Funding; the amounts delegated represent the full cost of the service including a share of overheads such as IT equipment and accommodation. Although there is no explicit information about alternative providers, most of the service specifications are sufficiently detailed for schools to adopt Best Value principles in making their purchasing decisions. Clear information about all services is conveniently contained in a single ring binder. Schools wishing to subscribe to service level agreements (SLAs) do so by signing a single form helpfully pre-printed with the charges for the particular school. There are service standards for all services, although most are expressed in qualitative rather than quantitative terms. A few services are offered at different levels. There is an annual questionnaire survey of user views and service managers have attended headteacher meetings. However, some schools remain unclear about how their views shape future improvements. It is also unclear in some cases what service schools would continue to receive from central budgets if they did not subscribe.

89. Support for **Finance** is satisfactory with a number of strengths. The finance function is split between the education and the corporate services department, but co-ordination works well in practice. The service is delivered in a way which promotes school autonomy by making clear where final responsibility lies. Schools subscribing to the SLA receive effective on-site and telephone advice on budget setting and monitoring. All aspects of financial support were highly rated by most schools surveyed and those that were visited. Provision of budget information is good. Schools receive a helpful budget information pack in sufficient time before the start of the financial year. As well as the school's delegated budget, the pack contains details of devolved Standards Fund and other specific grant allocations, the SLAs for schools wishing to buy back council services, and helpful guidance on budget-setting, including salary information about all current members of the teaching and non-teaching staff.

90. Financial transactions and reconciliation with schools' SIMS systems are available on-line. Schools receive a clearly-presented print-out each month showing expenditure against budget. The pupil data information pack contains limited but adequate comparative spending information, and Darlington schools are encouraged

to use the Audit Commission web site for more detailed comparisons. Internal audit reports are comprehensive and clear, leaving governing bodies in no doubt about any action that needs to be taken.

91. The **personnel** service is improving rapidly following the appointment of a specialist personnel officer within the education department and is now satisfactory. Policies inherited from Durham LEA are being up-dated. Shortcomings in the quality of the information provided to the payroll service are being actively addressed. At the time of the school survey, personnel services were heavily criticised and rated amongst the worst for all LEAs inspected so far. However, school visits provided many examples of improvement, including the sensitive handling of difficult competency cases.

92. **Premises-related services** are provided by community services, a department of the council which manages the in-house contractors for buildings maintenance, cleaning, catering, and grounds maintenance. The services are all at least satisfactory and offer good value for money overall. The council no longer has a separate client support unit, although technical advice on contracting is available to schools from officers within community services. Some schools do not find the distinction between the client support and provider roles sufficiently clear. Nevertheless, notwithstanding the potential conflict of interest, this is a practical and satisfactory arrangement for a small council. Services provided by in-house contractors are independently monitored as part of community services' ISO 9002 certification.

93. Support to schools on **property maintenance** and the management of building projects is satisfactory. The contractor's response to emergency calls is a particular strength. Headteachers welcome the continuity provided by an attached surveyor who knows their schools well and is reported to give impartial advice should a school wish to approach alternative providers. The recent procurement and installation of temporary classrooms to replace an infant school building evacuated and sealed because of flooding and asbestos exposure provides an example of the ability of the service to act promptly. The service uses the LEA's asset management plan to help programme its activities efficiently and is sensitive to the need to minimise disruptions during the school day.

94. The **cleaning** service is well-managed. Community services also offer advice and training for schools employing their own cleaners. Training is available for caretakers and the LEA helpfully offers an insurance scheme for long-term absence. Although **grounds maintenance** was poorly rated in the school survey, most schools purchase only a basic level of service and receive sound value for money.

95. The **catering** service provided by the current in-house contractor is responsive to the needs of schools, taking an active part in the Healthy Schools initiative and providing a number of incentive schemes to promote the take-up of meals. The cost of catering will be delegated to primary schools from April 2001. An SLA will be offered so that the present service can continue if the school wishes.

## **Recommendations**

### **In order to improve strategic management:**

- the relationship the LEA will maintain with its schools as they progressively attain greater autonomy should be more clearly defined, and a timescale and staged targets for securing this relationship should be set;
- service plans and progress reports should contain SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-related) targets, in order to enable senior managers and services to monitor and measure implementation and effectiveness; and
- clear, joint protocols for working should be established between the education and social services departments.

## **SECTION 4: SPECIAL EDUCATION PROVISION**

### **Strategy**

96. The LEA's strategy for special educational needs (SEN) is sound. It is firmly based on the inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools and is in line with national policy.

97. Almost all schools visited were very clear about the LEA's intention for greater pupil inclusion. The development of inclusive education is a clear priority in the EDP and is supplemented with the SEN action plan, although in some cases intended developments go beyond the plans and a revision of targets and timescales is needed. An SEN strategy group, with representatives from schools, monitors progress but evaluation of progress is made more difficult as some key developments and milestones in the plan are not sufficiently detailed.

98. The LEA provides statements for a higher percentage of pupils and educates a slightly higher proportion of pupils in special schools than is the case regionally and nationally. Part of its strategy is to reduce the number of statements required through earlier intervention and to include more pupils with statements in mainstream schools, especially in their neighbourhood school. Changes to the resourcing model, including the deployment of support teachers, educational psychologists and educational welfare officers in 'patch teams', focused work on SEN in the early years, a reduction of pupils educated in special schools outside the LEA, and the development of specialist provision attached to mainstream schools for pupils with visual impairment and those with autism, have helped to meet these objectives but there is still some way to go.

99. Darlington's only special school provides for a wide range of need including pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties, severe and moderate learning difficulties, autism and emotional and behavioural difficulties. The quality of provision is good and the school has responded rapidly and very effectively to support the needs of the LEA by developing provision in the school and in mainstream schools. The LEA is making progress in establishing attached mainstream provision and has a more effective structure for its support services. However, it does not have a longer-term strategy to firmly establish the role for the special school.

100. Overall spending on SEN is relatively low. Funds to support pupils with statements of SEN are devolved to secondary schools, and from April 2001 to primary schools. Further funds are to be delegated to schools based on the needs of pupils who would usually have had a statement but without the need for statutory assessment. The intention is to enable schools to intervene earlier and to cut down the number of statements. Consideration is being given to how further resources can be delegated without the need for elaborate systems which require moderation. The resourcing strategy is developing well and is supported by headteachers. Schools, however, are not held accountable for how resources for SEN are spent.

101. A parent partnership scheme has been developed recently and is beginning to work productively. A focus group of parents consulted, as part of the inspection was, in the main, very positive about the support they had received from the LEA.

### **Statutory obligations**

102. The LEA takes reasonable steps to meet its statutory obligations in relation to SEN. Almost 95 per cent of statements are completed within the required timescale and the LEA has reduced the proportion of delayed statements through improved joint working with the health authority. The content of statements has been improved and is of good quality. The annual review process is sharply focused on a review of the statement and progress made by pupils. This system has contributed greatly to the capacity of the LEA to fulfil its responsibilities in monitoring the progress of pupils with statements.

### **Improvement and value for money**

103. SEN support for school improvement is sound. The sensory support services, the early years service, and in a number of respects the 'patch teams', contribute satisfactorily to school improvement. Officers and specialist teachers are accessible and willing to give advice and support. Overall, the support for pupils with behaviour problems is satisfactory, but there is a lack of consistency in the way 'patch teams' work. Almost half the schools visited expressed some concerns about the work of their patch team, especially the speed at which pupils access appropriate support. Support for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties is limited, especially for secondary schools. Training opportunities generally, are adequate for teachers but less sufficient for support assistants, especially in secondary schools. Secondary SENCOs have a thriving network, managed by themselves and supported by the LEA. Primary SENCOs, however, do not have an equivalent and feel less well supported or informed.

104. The quality of provision for pupils with SEN is not sufficiently monitored or evaluated by the LEA. The system of annual review has been improved, but the LEA has no overall strategy for monitoring and supporting schools' work, and does not collect data on how pupils, especially those with statements, are supported. Target-setting for pupils with SEN is insufficiently developed. Advisers have a limited role in relation to the quality assurance of SEN. However, the LEA has recently revised its plans for meeting its obligations to provide quality assurance and to improve the accountability of schools for their use of resources, and is considering the appointment of additional staff to undertake this role.

105. Despite these weaknesses, value for money is sound. The LEA meets statutory obligations and support for SEN commands generally widespread support from schools and parents. The LEA has recognised that its heavy reliance on out-borough special schools represents poor value for money and is taking appropriate action and achieving some success in reducing the number of placements. Nevertheless, at present, the weaknesses in quality assurance mean LEA does not have the capacity to apply Best Value principles to evaluate the value for money it provides; neither do its schools.

## **Recommendations**

### **In order to improve the provision for special educational needs:**

- the targets and timescales in major plans should be revised to take account of all developments currently in process, and to define more clearly the future role of the special school; and
- better systems should be devised to monitor and evaluate the provision for, and progress of, pupils with SEN in mainstream schools.

## **SECTION 5: ACCESS**

### **The supply of school places**

106. The LEA's planning of school places is good and is good value for money. The school organisation plan clearly defines the issues to be addressed over the next five years, helpfully dividing the borough into eight areas for planning future primary provision. The Dioceses are very well consulted and have confidence in the work of the senior officer concerned. Roll forecasts have proved very accurate and well within Audit Commission guidelines. The plan is particularly clear about provision for pupils with behavioural difficulties and those out of school. The council's criteria for the possible amalgamation of separate infant and junior schools are also explicit and helpful.

107. The LEA's holistic approach to school place planning using funding from a number of sources is a strength. Darlington has few unfilled places in primary schools compared with other unitary authorities. The overall surplus of eight per cent is concentrated in six schools with more than 25 per cent spare capacity which the LEA is taking appropriate action to address. The infant class size plan has been implemented efficiently. The LEA started with a proportion of infants in large classes that was well above the national average; there are now no children in classes of 31 or more. Building projects at a number of schools have successfully combined infant class size reductions with improved facilities and increased capacity in response to parental preferences.

108. No secondary school now has more than 25 per cent spare capacity. Imaginative schemes have been implemented at two secondary schools which have reduced the proportion of surplus places in the secondary sector to six per cent, well below the national average and Audit Commission target of ten per cent. The schemes have enhanced the appearance and improved the facilities at the schools which, alongside support for school improvement, should make them more attractive to parents and reduce pressure on over-subscribed school.

### **Asset management**

109. Asset management is very good. The cost per pupil is half the national average and is very good value for money. The LEA has been proactive in developing its asset management plan (AMP) and has been commended by the DfEE for its consultation processes. Condition surveys were completed by an independent contractor at an early stage, enabling the LEA to act as a pilot for the electronic transfer of condition data to the DfEE. Suitability data was also transferred electronically well ahead of the deadline.

110. The AMP is clear and rigorous. There are explicit links between the AMP, other Darlington plans, national initiatives, and to the quality of teaching. There is transparent prioritisation of capital projects which are taken into account in the capital budget-setting process. A group of headteachers usefully assists the LEA in prioritising projects. Schools rated the quality of asset management planning as the best of all LEAs surveyed so far. Evidence from school visits shows that schools are using the information in the AMP well to plan their own maintenance programmes.

## **Admissions**

111. Admission arrangements are unsatisfactory. They generate a large number of appeals, are unnecessarily protracted for many schools and parents, and provide poor value for money. The service plan appropriately includes a target for a reduction in appeals, but does not specify what action is planned to achieve it.

112. The compact nature of the town means that most families have easy access to a number of schools leading to heavy over-subscription at some. The information booklets have been improved following recommendations by the external auditor, but there is too little information on the scale and pattern of over-subscription in previous years. Although there is a common application form and deadline for initial applications, there is no timetable for appeals which, given the small size of the authority, are unnecessarily extended. The appeals panel considered 240 appeals in the year to August 2000, about half of which were decided in the parents' favour. A number of secondary schools do not have confirmed lists of new entrants until late in the summer term. The admissions forum meets regularly, but is often poorly attended and has not been asked to consider the appeals timetable or review the presentation of the information booklets.

113. The LEA's generous home-school transport policy is currently under review. The council is proposing to reduce entitlement to free transport by extending the limit from two miles to three for secondary pupils and to introduce a charge for concessionary seats. This is an appropriate step which will bring Darlington in line with the large majority of LEAs and help redirect scarce resources to school improvement. Consultations have been thorough, including early contact with diocesan bodies and a parental survey.

## **Provision of education otherwise than at school**

114. The LEA's overall provision to support those pupils who have no school place is in transition and is currently unsatisfactory. However, the LEA now has clear plans, and actions already in train, which, when fully implemented, will bring provision up to a satisfactory standard.

115. The LEA's home and hospital teaching service currently provides education for those pupils who are unable to attend school for medical or other reasons, such as school refusal. The quality of support for those pupils with medical problems is satisfactory, and contact time is sensibly based on their condition. Support for pupils refusing to attend school is, however, unsatisfactory. In many cases these pupils receive as little as five hours per week tuition. Home tutors keep records of the educational content covered with these pupils, but these do not include sufficient details about pupils' progress. From 1 April 2001, the home and hospital teaching service became part of the new alternative education service based at the reopened pupil referral unit (PRU). This is a logical and sensible development on the LEA's part. But, it is not clear how the new service will achieve 2002 targets for full-time equivalent education for pupils, such as school refusers, who are not being supported through the PRU.

116. A member of the advisory service visits pupils whose parents have elected to educate them at home. Letters sent to parents following a visit indicate unequivocally whether or not the alternative provision made is satisfactory. However, no central records are kept which monitor and evaluate the overall quality of provision made.

117. The LEA provides sound, and in a number of instances, good support for disaffected or vulnerable pupils who are in danger of exclusion. Social inclusion and regeneration funds have been used effectively to support two secondary schools with behaviour support and intervention units for pupils; the proportion of exclusions has dropped dramatically in one these schools. The LEA has established two very useful initiatives, one linking with the national INCLUDE project, alternative education for secondary pupils likely to be excluded due to poor behaviour or poor attendance. The Higher Horizons project, for example, takes 25 pupils from Year 11; schools are kept well informed about pupils' progress in order to help re-integration.

118. Provision for pupils permanently excluded from school is currently unsatisfactory. Referral criteria are sound, but the process is often too lengthy and protracted. The Inclusion Advisory Teacher visits permanently excluded pupils within days of the start of their exclusion but the interval between the date of permanent exclusion and alternative provision varies considerably. Some pupils who are out of school for a long a period of time do not receive satisfactory interim provision.

119. The pupil referral unit (PRU), for permanently excluded pupils in Key Stages 3 and 4, has not been providing support of sufficient quality to either the pupils or the schools. Following an urgent and much needed restructuring, detailed plans are now in place to improve the quality of education, and to focus on re-integration of pupils, particularly in Key Stage 3. The former PRU officially closed at the end of 2000. The LEA has operated an interim arrangement lasting until 1 April 2001 when a newly registered PRU took on provision for full-time equivalent education for excluded secondary aged pupils. Although having an unregistered unit for one term is not satisfactory, it was the most sensible way of maintaining the education of the pupils during restructuring.

120. The LEA is spending a lower amount on education otherwise than at school (EOTAS) services than equivalent LEAs. Its targeted use of other funding sources has helped to supplement central services but, given the weaknesses in levels of support and equivalent educational provision, it does not provide value for money. Planned developments, largely using existing resources more efficiently, should achieve satisfactory value for money.

## **Attendance**

121. The LEA's support for attendance is satisfactory. Despite fluctuations, overall attendance has improved and unauthorised absence reduced in line with that nationally. Attendance in primary schools for 1999/2000 fell below the national average for the first time since 1996. At secondary level, attendance is in line with the national average, although the level of unauthorised absence is currently higher. The LEA takes its legal responsibilities seriously and has a higher than national average rate for the prosecution for non-attendeers. There is a genuine attempt to

liaise with other agencies to address issues of non-attendance, including truancy sweeps with the police.

122. The LEA is working to improve its support for attendance by piloting a helpful new attendance policy. This details five clear stages of support with an appropriate emphasis on preventative measures. The LEA has yet to evaluate the pilot, particularly whether the new proposals place realistic demands on primary schools with limited administrative support.

123. Secondary schools surveyed were generally satisfied with support to improve attendance, but primary schools were significantly more critical than in most LEAs surveyed so far. A more positive picture emerged from visits to schools; support was satisfactory or better in almost all schools, although two schools with particular attendance problems expressed concerns about the frequency of visits by education welfare officers (EWOs). The education welfare service comprises only six EWOs, two of whom have additional responsibilities for children in public care and Travellers' children respectively. Spending per pupil on the service is lower than in similar LEAs, but support is sound and Darlington is achieving satisfactory value for money.

### **Behaviour support**

124. The provision for behaviour support is satisfactory, with some strengths. Expenditure per pupil is higher than that in equivalent LEAs, but represents satisfactory value for money. Secondary schools surveyed were positive about the LEA's support, but primary schools were generally negative. In contrast, inspection visits judged support to be at least satisfactory, and occasionally good, in all but two schools.

125. The behaviour support plan (BSP) is good. It is easy to use, with realistic and generally achievable targets. It successfully anticipated much of the subsequent national agenda on social inclusion and has incorporated this well into its strategic thinking and multi-agency approach. Nevertheless, the plan needs to review strategies to encourage re-integration and the willingness of schools to take pupils back. The LEA's behaviour policy is also clear and logically set out. It links well with other plans, especially the EDP and BSP. Satisfactory progress has been made in all activities, but the absence of detailed milestones limits the ability of the LEA to know accurately whether it is on target to meet all priority objectives. The LEA has set appropriate and challenging targets to reduce its overall exclusion rate. However, despite lower than average levels in primary, higher than average exclusion levels in secondary schools means it has missed its 2000 target.

126. As part of its provision for social inclusion, the LEA has formed a behaviour strategy group, comprising LEA officers, specialist support staff from education and social services, and headteacher representatives. The purpose of this group is clear but its work is not well known in schools. The core strategy of establishing a multi-agency link with schools is working satisfactorily in practice. However, the working practices of these 'patch teams' differs across the LEA. There is a lack of transparency of the criteria used to allocate behavioural support to schools and limited formal monitoring of the effectiveness of support provided at present.

127. The LEA provides an impressive programme of continuing professional development aimed specifically at managing and supporting challenging behaviour. Two secondary schools who operate their own behaviour support units have received effective support through social inclusion initiatives and funding.

128. The community education service (CES) makes a good contribution to the behavioural support service. Its service intentions are clear and helpful to schools. One of its projects, the 'Blitz Bus', an outreach facility for on-site work with schools, has been running successfully in a number of schools since April 2000. The CES also manages the work of the peer education group. This innovative and effective initiative, involves pupils themselves in voluntarily delivering sessions discussing anti-social behaviour and behaviour management, and in mentoring other young people. It has attracted strong local and national interest.

### **Health, safety, welfare, and child protection**

129. The LEA's provision for health and safety is satisfactory but provision for child protection is poor. Almost a quarter of primary schools judged support for child protection as poor or very poor; almost one fifth of secondary schools judged it to be unsatisfactory. The inspection confirmed this picture. The LEA's spending per pupil on child protection is low, and it is not achieving satisfactory value for money.

130. LEA documentation on health and safety procedures is sound and provides broad guidance relating to safe practice in schools. The annual health and safety visit to all schools is thorough and appreciated by headteachers. LEA officers provide appropriate advice on general health and safety matters. There is a system in operation whereby schools can call upon the expert advice of advisers from other LEAs within the region. This is an understandable approach for an LEA with a small number of general advisers, but does not guarantee that changes to safe practice in a particular curriculum area is passed on to schools in good time.

131. Joint work between social services and education is developing and recent work to develop the role of the area child protection committee (ACPC) for Darlington is a move in the right direction; but more training is needed for all those who work with children, especially teachers. The LEA meets its statutory duty to maintain a list of the designated senior member of staff responsible for child protection in each school, but does not have a secure system for ensuring that this list is regularly updated or that there has been recent and relevant training. There are insufficient training opportunities available to schools and none provided through the LEA. There has, for example, been no ACPC training since 1997. These weaknesses have been recognised in a recent lifelong learning scrutiny committee meeting, but the LEA has much work to do to bring the provision for child protection up to a satisfactory standard.

### **Children in public care**

132. Although there have been recent developments in co-ordinating the support for children in public care (CiPC), the current provision and associated value for money remain unsatisfactory.

133. There are 100 children currently in the care of Darlington borough council, the overwhelming majority in LEA schools. The LEA maintains satisfactory information about these children, including attendance and performance data, but the systematic exchange of information between social services and education is currently unsatisfactory. The experience of schools visited, for example in the extent and effectiveness of liaison by social services and involvement in reviews for CiPC, varied from good to poor. The EWO with responsibility for CiPC is working positively for a more productive relationship between social services and education. However, in general schools were not sufficiently well informed on the different responsibilities of the services involved, or how the LEA is fulfilling its responsibility to promote the achievement of CiPC and to meet its targets. All schools have a designated teacher for CiPC, in accordance with the statutory guidance, but systems to maintain a regularly updated register are underdeveloped. The LEA is aware of the weaknesses that exist at present, but is responding too slowly.

### **Minority ethnic children including Travellers**

134. Overall, the support for pupils of minority ethnic heritage, including Travellers' children is sound, but there are weaknesses in the use of data on these pupils. The percentage of minority ethnic pupils, at 2.4 per cent, is well below that found nationally or in similar LEAs. With the exception of Bangladeshi and Travellers' children, who make up the largest ethnic groups, numbers of other minority ethnic pupils are small and are spread across the LEA. Schools surveyed judged the level of support as satisfactory; the inspection generally confirms this view. The support for minority ethnic pupils and Travellers' children is shared with Durham County Council. This arrangement works satisfactorily and, overall, provides appropriate value for money.

135. The ethnic minority and Travellers achievement grant (EMTAG) action plan presents a clearly defined strategy to address local and national priorities. Action to support these priorities is clear and affordable. Overall targets for the performance of ethnic minority pupils are set within the action plan. However, although the LEA holds individualised pupil data and there is detailed performance data on Travellers' children, there is no systematic analysis of performance by other ethnic groups. Nor is this information, gathered by the EMTAG team, shared with link advisers as part of their target-setting and monitoring visit to schools

136. Recent guidelines, 'Education for a Multiethnic Society', issued to schools in April 2000 are clear and concise. They rightly emphasise the need to appreciate the different cultural backgrounds of minority ethnic pupils whilst providing access to the full curriculum. Visits to those schools with pupils of minority ethnic heritage indicated that EMTAG support staff were generally helpful and effective. However, in primary schools, support has not always been sufficiently linked to the ongoing classroom work of these pupils. There is evidence that working relationships between the EMTAG support teachers and class teachers are now closer, and that support work is now firmly related to the national strategies for literacy and numeracy.

## **Measures to combat racism**

137. Support to schools for combating racism remains unsatisfactory. Although the LEA now has a sound range of policies on measures it intends to take to combat racism, it has been slow to put sufficiently clear practices and procedures into place. The LEA has been late in formally addressing the recommendations of the inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence (Macpherson report, 1999) and the consolidation of links between the LEA's initial work and council-wide approaches to racial equality and opportunity has been slow to develop.

138. Recent published documents provide a clear view of the LEA's thinking and a sound basis for developing appropriate measures to combat racism. Nevertheless, they do not specifically consider the training needs of teachers, and the LEA has yet to confirm its intentions about the type of support offered to schools when dealing with racist incidents.

## **Gifted and talented pupils**

139. The LEA makes satisfactory provision to support gifted pupils, principally through the national literacy and numeracy strategies, but has yet to develop equivalent planning and provision for talented pupils. The LEA has established a support group, with teacher representatives from a number of LEA schools, to develop ideas for extending provision, both in and out of school. One successful curriculum initiative, 'Challenge Plus', ran in April 2000 and involved 148 gifted pupils from years 7 and 8. Two summer schools for gifted and talented pupils provided satisfactory opportunities for gifted pupils although neither the criteria for selection nor the provision addressed the broad range of talented pupils.

## **Social exclusion**

140. Promoting social inclusion and lifelong learning are key corporate priorities for Darlington. Current weaknesses in aspects of planning and provision of support are just outweighed by strengths and, overall, the LEA is beginning to make adequate provision for its most vulnerable pupils. Links with many partners and other agencies have helped to promote social inclusion in disadvantaged parts of the LEA and education makes some effective contributions to regeneration strategies. Nevertheless there are important aspects of the LEA's contribution that require improvement.

141. There are weaknesses in its provision for child protection, for CiPC, and delays in providing sufficient education for all pupils educated otherwise than at school, including those permanently excluded. Liaison with social services has not been sufficiently developed and is affecting support for CiPC. The LEA has been slow to develop and share a strategy for dealing with racist incidents. Education services and other departments maintain and exchange information on pupils, but delays in developing a comprehensive pupil database means that inter-agency monitoring of those pupils most at risk of social and educational exclusion is not as efficient as it should be.

142. Balancing those weaknesses, however, are clear intentions, and recent actions, to develop better and clearer working practices across different agencies within Darlington, for example in the creation of 'patch teams'. These have led to improvements in the co-ordination of support, but practice is not yet consistent or sufficiently clear to schools. Partnerships with police, health, voluntary agencies and the private sector are focused effectively on support for disaffected young people, crime reduction and actions against drug and alcohol abuse.

143. The LEA has also been creative in many of its ideas, for example in its holistic approach to tackling the problems facing schools in regeneration areas and in the innovative contributions of the CES. The LEA's approach to the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs commands widespread support from schools. Lifelong Learning provision is now beginning to enhance individuals' involvement in continuing education and, despite some slippage in initial targets, to improving parental and family involvement in children's learning. Much has been accomplished, but the LEA will need to focus its resources on areas of weakness if it is to improve its overall support for all types of vulnerable pupils.

## **Recommendations**

### **In order to improve pupils' access to education and to better promote social inclusion:**

- action should be taken to reduce the delay between assessment and access to full-time equivalent education for pupils permanently excluded from school;
- the progress of pupils educated otherwise than at school should be consistently monitored, recorded and evaluated.
- child protection procedures should be strengthened by undertaking an audit of teachers' recent and relevant training, and addressing outstanding training needs;
- information about the achievement of minority ethnic pupils should be improved and used in setting LEA, school, and individual pupil targets;
- clearer procedures and protocols for reporting of racist incidents, and how the LEA will respond, should be established; and
- a clear action plan should be produced to achieve the targeted reduction in appeals, and to provide better information to parents on previous patterns of over-subscription in individual schools and across the LEA.

## **APPENDIX: RECOMMENDATIONS**

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- a clear action plan should be produced to achieve the targeted reduction in appeals, and to provide better information to parents on previous patterns of over-subscription in individual schools and across the LEA.

### **In order to improve monitoring, support, challenge and intervention:**

- clear criteria for the categorisation of schools should be published so that schools can apply them in their own self review;
- further steps should be taken to clarify the LEA's responsibility to challenge schools;
- link advisers should: discuss targets with schools before these are approved by governing bodies; consider implications of the targets for the working patterns of the school; and ensure that challenge to targets reflects analysis of the prior attainment of pupils;
- governing bodies should receive copies of reports of monitoring visits; and
- ways of improving challenge and curriculum support for secondary schools should be developed, possibly through co-operation with another LEA or outside agency and by developing the roles of the Beacon and specialist schools.

### **In order to improve support for schools causing concern:**

- the LEA should clarify how it will monitor progress, making explicit: how proposed actions are intended to support the school's development; how that support relates to the implementation of the action plan; clear targets and criteria for progress; and an exit strategy for the school, with a timetable for reducing LEA intervention.

### **In order to improve the provision for special educational needs:**

- the targets and timescales in major plans should be revised to take account of all developments currently in process, and to define more clearly the future role of the special school; and

- better systems should be devised to monitor and evaluate the provision for, and progress of, pupils with SEN in mainstream schools.

**In order to improve strategic management:**

- the relationship the LEA will maintain with its schools as they progressively attain greater autonomy should be more clearly defined, and a timescale and staged targets for securing this relationship should be set;
- service plans and progress reports should contain SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-related) targets, in order to enable senior managers and services to monitor and measure implementation and effectiveness; and
- clear, joint protocols for working should be established between the education and social services departments.

**In order to improve political scrutiny and performance management arrangements:**

- monitoring and evaluation procedures should be developed (in consultation with members of scrutiny committees), to enable committees to effectively monitor the delivery of corporate themes and targets, and the work of associated departments and services.

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